

# Examining Masculinity and Gender in Kaqchikel Sololá, Guatemala

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“THE LAW IS GIVING MANY freedoms to women,” notes an interviewee with some dismay when I ask him about the current status of indigenous women in the rural Guatemalan town of Kaqchikel Sololá. This response exemplifies men’s reactions to the slow but steady pace at which women are gaining in the struggle for their rights to egalitarian

treatment—a dignified life, educational opportunity, access to employment, and political participation, among many other demands. These advances by women imply substantial changes in gender relations and challenges to the patriarchal structure that operates in the community.

The respondent’s answer is interesting because it was not expressed in a traditional and sexist tone, but rather with concern for the possible consequences of changes in gender relations as a result of the few rights already gained by indigenous women. This transformation in the way men view women and their new status shows a great change in men’s attitudes, practices, belief systems, and social values, given that the prevalent idea is still that the restricted space

of the woman is the home. Just a couple of decades ago, the same man would have responded differently.

What I have presented above, briefly, illustrates one aspect of male identity—the perception of women. Kaqchikel men in Sololá generally have versions of themselves based on the physical demands of their jobs and the important roles they play in the community. These qualities are part of the justification for dominance in their heterosexual relationships. In addition, however, the masculine identities of Kaqchikel men are associated with detrimental behaviors, such as domestic violence and extramarital relationships, which endorse the subordination of women and go against efforts to achieve gender equality.

## Master’s Thesis

I address these and other related topics in my master’s thesis, “Masculinity, Gender, and Power in a Mayan-Kaqchikel Community in Sololá, Guatemala,” written in 2014 as part of my degree in Latin American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin through the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (LLILAS). I considered it important to approach the topic of masculinity as it was a field barely explored by gender studies scholars in Guatemala. I was interested in what it means to be a man, and in men’s perceptions of women

(wives and daughters), of other Kaqchikel men, and of themselves. This kind of information cannot be acquired when working only with women.

The study of masculinity provides important insights for the analysis of Guatemalan society in general, as most studies carried out there look at social class and ethnicity. In order to examine disparities that exist between heterosexual couples, men's versions must be explored.

My interest in this topic is due to the fact that I am a member of the indigenous Kaqchikel community of Sololá, located in the southeastern part of Guatemala City. I know the culture, the language, and the belief systems because I was born and raised in the community (all of this facilitated my access to the private lives of people and my communication with them). I grew up with opportunities (some say privileges) by virtue of being a man. For example, my mother tells me that when I was born, my father ordered the slaughter of a lamb to hold a big party, something that did not happen when my older sister was born. During my childhood I was able to go out and have fun, make decisions about my own life, go to work, study, play, and participate in other activities with my friends. Because of the major changes in Guatemalan society in the 1990s, my sisters were also able to receive a formal education, but did not enjoy the other opportunities I had. These and other aspects of my life prompted me to pursue my study of masculinities.

In my thesis, I explore three important subjects: the different versions of masculinities among Kaqchikel men in Sololá; men's perception of the contemporary lives of women; and the prevalence of gender inequality, including violence and extramarital affairs.

Throughout the thesis I emphasize two historical moments: (1) the experience of the interviewees in the past, that is, before the social upheaval that caused the 1980s state violence; and (2) people's experiences in the present, that is, the time after the great national movement of 1990, which was marked by the active participation of indigenous people in the political arena, the rise of capitalism in the 1990s, and the substantial changes introduced by the signing of peace agreements between the Guatemalan

National Revolutionary Unity party and the state in 1996. All of this caused changes in the belief systems of people, in their material lives, and in gender relations.

The purpose of this study is to open up debate about the many aspects of masculinity. As I have already stated, there are very few studies about masculinity in Guatemala despite the existence of violence and subtle forms of female subordination. However, I do acknowledge that masculinity is not always related to pernicious aspects of gender, because just as there are men who take advantage of their gender privilege, there are also those who reject the use of violence and other forms of subordination and gender oppression.

### Masculine Identities

My thesis project was based on the assumption that there are many types of masculine identities in the Sololá Kaqchikel community that are configured and shaped largely by historical conditions and social and cultural practices. Men's social power and status are underpinned in part by old, well-established ideologies and belief systems, as well as by their belief in a biological superiority, which they justify by pointing to their leadership roles in the community and their hard work in agricultural activities. The

social institutions where men create and learn contemporary forms of masculinity are the school, the family, local committees, and the church.

In discussing masculine identity, I am referring to a network of social relations that is constructed around expressions of gender identity. Masculinity is socially constructed and reproduced through daily interactions. The main feature of this gender identity is that it is embedded in power relations. Thus, masculinity is equated to domination in contrast to femininity, which is generally linked to submission and passiveness (Connell 2005; Bourdieu 2005; Gutmann 2006).

A current characteristic of masculinity is that certain of its features are assumed to be normal practice in society. This assumption legitimizes the subordination of women through cultural practices and institutions. Men have not only developed domination in the home, but also have maintained it in the political, social, and cultural arena. This is evident in the configuration of gender in the workplace, school, and church. Unlike many other studies on masculinity in Latin America that use the term *machismo* to describe men's behavior, this study does not use that term because Kaqchikel men do not use it; instead, they use expressions such as *mama' ach'i* (the big man),



Autoridades indígenas (Indigenous authorities).

*itz'el ach'i* (the bad man), and *ajch'ayonel* (the batterer) to refer to men who engage in sexist or violent practices.

The creation of one kind of masculine identity is strongly linked with the authority and dominance of men in heterosexual relationships. Among the Kaqchikel, the man is the one who usually owns property and a house where the couple lives upon establishing a family. Before starting a family, the man must have a home, regardless of its size. Men are generally the ones who inherit land from their parents. And if land is divided among children, male children inherit double or triple the size of the property from their parents as compared to the size given to their sisters. This unequal distribution of land builds and legitimizes the power of men in heterosexual relationships. At home, the man is the one who usually sets the rules for the family, because common belief dictates that if this does not happen, or if the woman takes control of the household, the family will not function.

#### Men's Roles in the Community

Kaqchikel men stress the importance of their roles as responsible parents and hard workers. The man is the one who goes out to work the land because he has the strength, the skills, the endurance, and the knowledge to work it. A man's work in the field, they say, protects his wife and his children. Kaqchikel men claim that the life of a farmworker is not easy. He must endure both the heat and the cold, and he must bear the stings of insects and plants, and resign himself to eating a cold meal that he has taken with him.

Men's authority has to do with their political and civil functions within the community. An older man who has lived an exemplary life can usually become a *K'amol B'ey*, a communal and religious leader whose purpose is to guide and advise young people. The *K'amol B'ey* is exclusively a male role. He also serves as a godfather or problem solver in the community. Men do not use this term to designate themselves, but are referred to in this way by others.

Other men have leadership roles in the community as well. They serve as presidents or members of different local committees, such as those overseeing water, roads, schools, and street lighting. Men believe that

they are better suited for these positions, so women are not allowed much participation.

There are men who, for various reasons, fail in their attempts to achieve an identity of leadership and power. I refer to this phenomenon as "unfulfilled masculinities." This term describes the experience of disappointed men who are unable to exert their alleged authority in a relationship. These men find themselves vulnerable and without much possibility of fulfilling the prototypical role of a man with authority for four reasons: they lack property, housing, formal education, and a stable income, as compared to their wives. A man with unfulfilled masculine identity usually faces problems of stability in his family and is not comfortable at home.

#### Men's Perceptions of Women

I dedicate a significant portion of my thesis to men's perceptions of women's lives. Men generally refer to a narrative of past versus present. They say that times have changed a lot and that this has brought many benefits to women. In the past, women had very difficult lives: there was no electric lighting, no running water in the home, there were no electric grinders for corn nor home appliances, no transportation. Additionally, women did not have many opportunities for participation in political or social spaces. But currently, men say, women's participation has increased. There are even indigenous women in Congress. Men point out that change is good but that women must still respect the authority of men. They should not transgress the boundaries of acceptable gender norms because this puts at risk the authority of men, which is allegedly necessary for a family to function.

With regard to the division of housework, men usually wield sympathetic speech, that is, they highlight and exalt the work of women. They recognize the fact that women work more than they do, that women's work is monotonous and difficult and there is rarely time to rest. Men praise their wives for doing such complex work. However, they are unwilling to share in household chores because of marked gender roles as well as the force of shame and stigma. Men's lack of involvement in household chores has a negative impact on the lives of women, preventing them from participating in other social and political activities.

#### Gender Inequality, Domestic Violence, and Extramarital Affairs

Kaqchikel men in Sololá express concern that gender inequality is still prevalent. They claim to support the idea of eliminating gender inequality by giving a formal education to their sons and daughters alike. These men also claim that gender inequality was more pervasive in the previous era, when they were young. Yet most of the men I interviewed relied on a basic paradigm promoting gender inequality: the authority of the husband is imposed on the wife in subtle ways so as not to cause any marital conflict or potential separation.

For example, one day as I interviewed Celso, a 42-year-old gardener, his wife came into the room carrying their baby and politely asked me about the nature of the study I was conducting. I answered her question and also decided to ask her about the year she was born because it was the topic we were discussing in the interview. Before the woman could answer my question, Celso interrupted, saying that she had been born in the late 1950s. Celso's quick intervention struck me. Then I looked at his wife again and asked a direct question. This time I asked her about the place where she was born. And again, before she could utter the first words, her husband answered that she had been born in Sololá but raised in another community. I stubbornly tried another question until Celso finally realized that I wanted his wife to answer my questions directly, with her own voice. It was interesting to me to observe that some men think that their wives could be imprudent, inaccurate, and even wrong in their answers.

Domestic violence in communities used to be commonplace due to alcoholism and the character or temperament of some men even when they are not drunk. Local groups have sought to intervene in cases of family violence because they view it as a pervasive factor that affects the lives of all people, most especially children. Today, most men no longer drink as stubbornly as in the past due to religious conversion, near-death experiences with alcohol, or because they have taken courses or workshops on how to prevent gender violence. Yet pressure to drink and commit acts of violence persists, according to this account by an informant named Arturo:



When people drink at a cantina, they start telling you many things. Once they told me, “hey, why did you stop coming to the cantina? Is it true that your wife does not allow you to get out of the house anymore?” And I told them, “Yes, my wife does not like me to drink anymore.” And they went on, “Well, why don’t you beat your wife? I beat my wife whenever that bitch does not follow my rules ...” There, at the cantina, the men start talking about women. They give you the courage to go home and beat your wife.

When violence is excessive, women try to deal with it in several ways. Some file a formal complaint before the authorities in the city center. Indigenous women who are not fluent in Spanish may choose to go to the local COCODE (a communal organization) or the K’amol B’ey. Sometimes women turn to occult practices, attempting to change the character of the man in question with the use of special potions, rituals, or witchcraft. These secret practices are seen as useful, feasible, and, sometimes, the only options when society does not give them an answer to their problems.

Despite being condemned by religious and political opinion, extramarital relationships are still prevalent in communities and seem to be sought more commonly by men. Though they are not always associated with violence, these relationships inflict psychological damage on women, especially when they have children and no option other than to bear the situation. Extramarital relationships show the power dimensions of gender relations, whereby men have more chances to have a lover because of their economic power or simply because they enjoy more freedom than their wives.

### Conclusion

Gender relations in the Kaqchikel community are complex and occur in various contexts, especially the home, community groups, church, and the school, all of which are spaces used to create, maintain, and socialize masculine identities. These identities, as we have seen, have positive aspects for families and society in general, but also pernicious ones, such as domestic violence.

My thesis explores the lives of men who were born during the 1960s or 1970s, many

of whom have a concept of masculinity very particular to their generation. Their stories contrast to those of people born in the late 1970s. To a great extent, this new generation had access to formal education; therefore, their concept of culture and common practices is different. It is good to hear men say, “the times are changing.” I am hopeful this social change fosters a favorable future for men and women alike. ☀

*Rigoberto Ajcalón Choy received his master’s degree from LLILAS in spring 2014. His master’s thesis, which forms the basis for this article, was awarded the LLILAS Best Thesis prize. In spring*

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Top: Músicos en Sololá (Musicians in Sololá); bottom: Guatemala multicultural (Multicultural Guatemala).